DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 650 UD 027 364

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TITLE Testimony on Hispanic Literacy and Education.
INSTITUTION National Council of La Raza, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 21 Jun 88
NOTE 10p.
PUB TYPE Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Bilingual Education; *Dropout Prevention; *Dropout Programs; Educationally Disadvantaged; *Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Programs; Hearings; High Risk Students; *Hispanic Americans; *Literacy Education; Supplementary Education
IDENTIFIERS English Literacy Grants

ABSTRACT

This testimony was presented by the chairperson of the board of directors of one of the largest national Hispanic organizations before a Senate Republican Task Force on Hispanic Affairs. The following key points are presented: (1) low educational attainment and literacy severely limit the economic opportunities of Hispanics and place a strain on a labor market that increasingly requires highly trained workers; (2) limited English proficiency places a disproportionate number of Hispanic students at risk of early school failure, the greatest predictor of future dropping out; (3) depending on the standard used, the Hispanic illiteracy rate is between 11.9 percent and 56 percent; and (4) current public and private literacy programs, such as the English Literacy Grants Program, cannot meet the need of the Hispanic community due to inadequate funding. The following recommendations are suggested: (1) fully fund the English Literacy Grants Program; (2) expand bilingual education programs through the 1989 Bilingual Education Amendments and programs for the educationally disadvantaged through Chapter 1 of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act and the Chapter 1 Migrant Education Program, and begin dropout prevention and school retention programs at the elementary and junior high/middle school levels; (3) structure literacy programs to meet the needs of low-income persons and working parents; and (4) develop new Federal literacy programs targeted at Hispanics similar to the Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford School Improvement Amendments of 1988. (FMW)

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TESTIMONY ON

HISPANIC LITERACY AND EDUCATION

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Presented by

Rita DiMartino
Chairperson
Board of Directors
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An Inquiry held by the
U.S. Senate Republican
Task Force on Hispanic Affairs

June 21, 1988

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF LA RAZA

I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, members of the Task Force on Hispanic Affairs, my name is Rita DiMartino and I am the Chairperson of the Board of Directors of the National Council of La Raza, one of the largest national Hispanic organizations. The National Council of La Raza exists to improve life opportunities for Americans of Hispanic descent and is a private, nonprofit organization representing over 80 local Hispanic community-based organizations serving 32 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. The Council has a long-standing commitment to improving the educational opportunities available to Hispanic children, youth and adults. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to express our concerns regarding undereducation and literacy in the Hispanic community.

Education is perhaps the single most important issue for Hispanics; it almost always tops the list of concerns in surveys of the Hispanic community. There is little wonder why this is so. Hispanics are the most undereducated major U.S. population group, experiencing a cycle of undereducation that begins in the earliest grades. There is a critical need for high quality, accessible and affordable English literacy programs for Hispanic children, youth, adults, and out-of-school youth of limited English proficiency. Among the adult Hispanic population alone, there exists an egregious functional illiteracy rate.

The effects of this undereducation have long been felt within the Hispanic community as low educational attainment and literacy have limited the quality of jobs available to Hispanic adults, and have inhibited the ability of parents to help their children improve their life opportunities via education. The data paint a picture of educational neglect, but also illustrate some of the points along the education pipeline at which Hispanics

appear to be particularly vulnerable -- points at which educators, policy makers and community members can design education interventions to improve education outcomes. Any initiative that concerns literacy services for limited-English proficient persons disproportionately affects the Hispanic community.

II. HISPANIC EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Education is perhaps the key determinant of employment opportunities, and Hispanics are the most undereducated major population group. In 1986, 11.9% of Hispanics over 25 years of age had completed less than five years of schooling, compared to only 1.8% of the total non-Hispanic population. National studies suggest that up to 56% of Hispanic adults can be considered functionally illiterate. As of 1987, only 50.9% of Hispanics 25 years of age and over had completed four years of high school or more, compared to 63.4% of Blacks and 77.0% of Whites. The median number of school years completed by Hispanics as of 1987 was 12.0, compared to 12.4 for Blacks and 12.7 for Whites. The dropout rate for Hispanics remains the highest for any major United States subpopulation, estimated at 45-50%, and is over 70% in some large urban areas.

Early school failure has been shown to be perhaps the greatest predictor of a child's later dropping out of school. Children who are significantly older than the average age for a given grade are said to be enrolled below grade level. Such enrollment may result from a number of factors, but most frequently it is caused by a child's "failing" a grade and being kept back to repeat it. The percentage of Hispanics enrolled below grade level increases steadily and is alarmingly higher than for Whites. For example, in 1984 28% of Hispanics in grades one through four were enrolled below grade level, com

pared to 21% for Whites. In grades five through eight, 39.5% of Hispanics were enrolled below grade level, compared to 26.9% for Whites. By grades nine through ten, the rate for Hispanics was 43.1%, compared to 26.3% for Whites.

Early school failure is a problem for both English-proficient and limited-English proficient Hispanic children. However, limited-English proficient children are at higher risk of early school failure.

The statistics on limited-English proficient children have important implications for Hispanics and for early childhood education programs. According to several national studies, the number of school-aged children of non-English language backgrounds is expected to increase 40% by the year 2000, a more rapid increase than for children in the general population. The number of Spanish-language-background children is projected to grow at an even higher rate of 55%. Given this projected increase, and given the importance of language-appropriate programs at very early stages in a child's education, the availability of such programs must also grow if these children are to progress successfully through their academic careers.

Several studies of early childhood education programs indicate that the programs' impact on poor children is positive in both the short- and long-term. The studies reveal that children enrolled in these programs achieve greater intellectual and social performance as they begin school and achieve greater socioeconomic success later in life. For example, participants in these programs are likely to have more advanced literacy skills and are more likely to earn high school diplomas, to be employed, and to go to college.

III. LITERACY IN THE HISPANIC COMMUNITY

Depending on the standard used, the Hispanic illiteracy rate is between

11.9% and 56%. Illiteracy in English is not a problem unique to immigrants. Many native-born Hispanics are illiterate in English due to ineffective education or because they dropped out of school without having obtained basic literacy skills. Also, some migrant farmworkers were denied access to education. Regardless of the measure employed, Hispanics have substantially higher rates of illiteracy than the White or Black populations.

By the traditional measure of literacy — the completion of less than five years of schooling -- 11.9% of Hispanics over 25 years of age could be considered illiterate compared to 1.8% of the total non-Hispanic population in the same age group.

Based on other measures, Hispanics have much higher rates of functional illiteracy. The 1975 Adult Performance Level Study (APL) developed a standard for functional literacy which divided adult functional competency into three levels: APL 1, 2 and 3. APL 1 equaled functional illiteracy, APL 2 marginal literacy, and APL 3 meant advanced literacy. According to these standards, 56% of Hispanics were at APL 1, compared to 44% of Blacks and 16% of Whites. At APL 2 were 26% of Hispanics, 39% of Blacks and 34% of Whites. Only 18% of Hispanic adults were at the most advanced level, APL 3, and could be considered highly literate, compared to 17% of Blacks and 50% of Whites.

The English Language Proficiency Survey (ELPS) determined that while 13% of the population 20 years of age and older was illiterate, 48% of adults whose native language was other than English were illiterate. In total, the ELPS estimated that 17 to 21 million adults in the United States were illiterate. This study also determined that fully 22% of the illiterate adults in the United States were Hispanic, even though Hispanics totaled less than 6.4% of the adult U.S. population at that time. Thus between 3.7 and 4.6 million Hispanic adults were illiterate out of a total of about 9.6 million.

This means that, according to the ELPS, between 39% and 49% of the adult Hispanic population were illiterate in 1982. Researchers analyzing ELPS data, however, feel that the figures used in the study were conservative and that the actual number of illiterate Hispanics was probably higher.

The lack of full English proficiency and literacy among Hispanic and other language-minority group adults and out-of-school youth presents serious challenges to our nation. Illiteracy not only limits opportunities available for Hispanics to lead full, productive lives, but also places a serious strain on our economy. A well-educated and trained work force and literate citizenry are essential for American stability and international competitiveness in the 21st century.

IV. THE NEED FOR LITERACY SERVICES

Current public and private literacy efforts are inadequate to meet the need in the Hispanic and other communities. Thousands of Hispanic adults are placed on waiting lists for Adult Education and literacy classes yearly. Large urban centers such as Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, as well as many rural areas, report a serious lack of resources for literacy programs.

In addition, the demand for English literacy programs has increased greatly as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Individuals who wish to adjust their status from temporary resident to permanent resident under the new law must demonstrate an understanding of the English language and U.S. history and government or show enrollment in an approved course. Given the lack of programs that develop such skills, many Americans may be denied an opportunity to become legal residents as intended by Congress unless program capacity is expanded. Community-based literacy

programs are among the most effective methods of reaching Hispanics, but these model programs suffer from minimal funding.

The English Literacy Grants Program in the Adult Education Act, as created by the Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, is a promising — though limited — beginning to meeting the goal of achieving full literacy among Americans; provided it receives funding in the current appropriations process. This important program will provide grants for the operation of English literacy programs for adults and out-of-school youth with limited-English proficiency. An important aspect of this program is the reservation of funds for programs operated by community-based organizations, which are often the most effective in serving the populations most in need, such as individuals with limited-English proficiency.

The English Literacy Grants Programs is a modified version of the English Proficiency Act which was introduced in the Senate by Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) and received the strong support of several Senators, including Senator John McCain (R-AZ). The need for this program is demonstrated by the Congress' decision to include it in the omnibus education legislation recently signed into law by the President. However, the House of Representatives failed to provide funds for this program for Fiscal Year 1989, and the Senate will be marking-up their appropriations recommendations soon.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

The illiteracy problem among Hispanics requires immediate attention. As Hispanics become a greater proportion of the population and the work force, increasing Hispanic literacy will be essential for ensuring a trained labor force to meet the needs of the private and public sectors in the twenty-first

century. The following recommendations should be considered by policy makers of literacy with respect to the Hispanic community:

(1) The English Literacy Grants Program should be fully funded at $26.3 million for Fiscal Year 1989. This program can make a significant contribution to improving the English literacy skills of thousands of Americans.

(2) Illiteracy must be prevented among Hispanic children and youth by focusing attention on improving the educational system. Limited-English proficient children require effective bilingual education programs so that they can fully develop literacy skills without falling behind their English-speaking peers in subject matter competency. Successful bilingual education programs should be supported and expanded, and federal attention should be directed at ensuring access to programs for all limited-English proficient children and at increasing program effectiveness and accountability. The 1988 Bilingual Education Amendments, properly implemented, can help meet these needs. In addition, the educational system fails to appropriately serve native English-speaking Hispanic students. Hispanic children should be reached in the primary grades with early intervention efforts. Programs designed to serve educationally disadvantaged children — including Chapter One of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the Chapter One Migrant Education Program -- should be expanded to reach all eligible children. Dropout prevention and school retention programs should begin at the elementary and junior high/middle school level, before students drop out, and continue throughout high school.

(3) Literacy programs should be structured to meet the needs of low-income individuals and working parents. Consideration should be given to the constraints faced by working parents and single-parent households.

Literacy programs should make such services as child care and transportation available, and schedule classes and tutoring sessions to assure that all adults have access to these services. Literacy programs should be low-cost or free where possible, since illiteracy rates are greatest among low-income people.

(4) New and future federal literacy initiatives must address the needs of Hispanics. With the Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford School Improvement Amendments of 1988, the Congress created several programs designed to improve the literacy and basic skills levels of Americans. In addition to adequate funding, these programs need proper implementation to ensure that those in greatest need are appropriately served.

VI. CONCLUSION

Since Hispanics are the most undereducated major population group, it is critical that Congress recognize and respond to their needs. The economic success of the Hispanic community, and indeed of our whole society, in the future depends on our ability to provide an appropriate, high quality education to Hispanic children, youth and adults today.

The National Council of La Raza appreciates the opportunity to present our views and we thank the Task Force for your interest in this field. As always, the National Council of La Raza stands ready to assist the Congress in whatever way possible to assure that full educational needs of Hispanic Americans are appropriately met.